

Challenge's of the Consumer Generation: Teaching experiences within the Certificate of University Preparation

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Abstract

The University of Waikato's Certificate of University Preparation (CUP) was offered for the first time in 2000. The purpose of CUP is to provide a second opportunity to students under 20 who failed to gain University Entrance at school. This cohort group has unique needs. The purpose of this paper is to present a case study of my experiences with the first cohort group and the strategies that were developed to meet their needs.

Introduction

The content of CUP includes two compulsory non-credit papers that are offered through the Centre for Continuing Education. The papers are 'Study Skills' and 'Critical Thought'. The students are then able to pick two additional, bridging non-credit papers run by two Faculties: the Faculty of Science and Technology; and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

The Faculty of Science and Technology offers four bridging papers: Bridging Biology; Bridging Chemistry; Bridging Physics; and Bridging Maths. These are taught at approximately Bursary level. The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) offers two bridging courses: Bridging Arts; and Bridging Social Sciences.

I am the tutor for Bridging Social Science FAAS; last year I was the tutor also. This meant that I taught over 60% of the first cohort group, which subsequently enabled me to gauge quite accurately the nature of that group.

Characteristics

In 2000 there were over 100 students in total, they were all aged 17-18 and had failed 2 to 5 bursary subjects. It was important to note that while some had failed some bursary subjects, the subjects they had passed, they had passed well. In one case a scholarship pass. This meant that there was quite a diverse range of ability within the group, and as a cohort group they had limited life experience. These characteristics are different from the more traditional cohort groups of mature students that normally number under twenty in a class.

Impetus

My observations found that the reason for enrolment in CUP was very 'other driven'. The pressure from parents and peers in particular was very prevalent. The students who their for their parents sake or to stay with friends had completely different motivations from someone whose motivations were more goal oriented. The desire to have degree in order to ensure future employment was also present as was the desire to avoid the polytechnic alternative, which is completely different but connected to the 'other driven'

motivations. The other strong desire was that this was there opportunity to right the mistakes made in the previous year. There was also the feeling that if they did not enrol in CUP then they would be doing nothing, which, again to 'other driven' pressures, was not seen to be a desirable thing. Therefore the impetus these students had to enter into university also differs slightly from those of the traditional.

Consumer Generation

Another noticeable aspect of the group was what I call the 'Consumer Generation', a label for a group of behaviours. The 'Consumer Generation' links into the first two sections of the paper. The behaviours reflect the age of the students and influence the impetus of their enrolment. The behaviours are based on the ideology of individual responsibility and the reduction of state support associated with the last National government and the previous Labour government's policies. Within all that is 'new' human capital theory – the lynchpin of which is the belief in the more education one receives the more money one can earn.

Student fees and loans with limited student allowances and the need of many students to be in paid employment just to meet living expenses all serve to reinforce belief in this ideology and theory. With the fees for university study increasing each year students increasingly view themselves as the consumer of a product – a product that will lead to future employment with greater monetary rewards. If parents pay for the fees then they are the consumer also, which links into the impetus from parents and the additional pressures that arise from them being the consumer rather than the student themselves.

Unique Needs

It is the combination of the characteristics of the group, with the impetus for enrolment and the behaviours associated with the 'Consumer Generation', that created the set of unique needs of this first cohort group. Strategies were developed to meet these needs and implemented during the semester. Some could be calculated and used before the semester started and others were created during the semester from mine and others observations.

The strategies were applied in three areas: coaching/support; course content; and assessment of learner and of the programme.

Specific Strategies

Support/ Coaching

I made sure that I was available to students at all times by: attending lectures; running office hours; using voicemail and E-mail; and encouraging the students to make the most of these facilities. In the tutorials I took with all the students in Bridging Social Science I attempted to decode the rules of university study. I also used my extensive contact with the students to monitor their progress and keep an eye on those who needed more encouragement. This monitoring, in combination with my institutional knowledge, enabled me to resolve most of the personal and administrative problems of the students in a timely and efficient manner.

Course Content

Attempts were made to alter the course content so it would have meaning to the students. This completed by making it: goal driven and as close to a first year paper as possible. Attempts were also made by myself and the course lecturers to directly relate material when possible to 17-19 year old's life experiences.

Assessment of Learner

The strategy applied in the course assessment was to make the assignments practical giving the students the opportunity to apply skills needed for university study. By doing so the assignments were seen to be both applied and intellectual. Thus the assignments were very different from others received. One of the assignments, an in-class test served to simulate the requirements of first year psychology papers. The assignments also required the involvement of students in university life by having to independently research staff members and options for enrolment once part of a degree programme.

Assessment of Programme

There was a mid-year assessment of the programme by the Teaching, Learning Development Unit that served to reinforce my observations. It also allowed student a formal pathway to express their views on the Certificate in addition to the one encouraged by me, which could only ever be viewed as informal. This feedback allowed the possibility for refinement during the course and attempts were made to ensure that the needed refinement occurred.

Conclusion

This paper had established that the cohort group had unique needs and explained that these occurred as a result of the combination of their characteristics, impetus and consumer generation behaviours. These unique needs were met by strategies adopted during the running of the course. However, of all strategies adopted what made them work effectively was the level of support and understanding offered to the students through my role as tutor, which was enhanced by my observations.